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Senate probe: CIA mars climate for defections to U.S.

By Roy Gutman
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WASHINGTON — After more than a decade of living in the United States under an assumed identity, Gerardo Peraza, one of two high-level Cubans to defect to this country in recent years, dropped the pretense so he could testify in February at a congressional hearing on terrorism.

"He told us he was at the end of his rope," said a senior Senate aide, who asked not to be identified. "He had reached the point he really didn't care."

Peraza, who told Senate staff members that the CIA had abandoned him in an ill-paying and unsuitable job, is one of several intelligence defectors from communist states to break cover and criticize the CIA. For more than a year the Senate Intelligence Committee has been studying such complaints, and its principal conclusion is that the CIA indeed has a serious problem.

"In our judgment, the climate for defection is being killed by CIA procedures," said Robert Simmons, the committee's staff director.

Simmons said, however, that the CIA had been receptive to the committee's suggestions, which include a thorough review of procedures and a financial settlement with two Romanians whose complaints prompted the Senate investigation.

A committee report is expected to be made public later this spring, but the staff discussed the draft with reporters.

Sensitive sources

One fact revealed in the report is how relatively few intelligence, diplomatic or other foreign officials have defected to the United States — roughly 150 since 1969. Despite their low numbers, such defectors are regarded as among the most sensitive and valuable sources of human intelligence available to the CIA.

Virtually all have in common a wrenching transition from an exalted status abroad to a run-of-the-mill existence in the United States.

Peraza, who was secretary in Cuba's London embassy when he defected in November 1971, has had a real comedown. His current job is on the order of "pumping gas in a filling station," Senate aides said. They would not disclose the location.

The Cuban's testimony Feb. 26 before the Senate Judiciary subcommittee headed by Jeremiah Denton (R., Ala.), on the subject of support by the Castro government for international terrorism, went almost unnoticed by the public.

In the U.S. intelligence community, however, his very appearance was a cause for alarm. His CIA case officers urged him not to take what they regarded as a genuine risk and did everything possible to block the appearance. At one point the hearing was on the verge of being canceled.

In Cuban eyes, intelligence experts say, the onetime communications chief in the Cuban general staff and later head of counterespionage at the embassy in Britain is likely to remain a marked man. When his neighbors learned his identity from press photographs, it would be only a question of time before Cubans tracked him down, if they chose to.

But his appearance conveyed another meaning, a distress signal that Cuban and other Soviet bloc agents would instantly understand: that defection to the United States does not pay.

Some of the 150 defectors are well-known: Svetlana Alliluyeva (who has changed her name to Lana Peters), daughter of the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin; Arkady Shevchenko, former top-ranking Soviet official in the U.N. Secretariat, and Romuald Spasowski, the Polish ambassador to Washington. It is the less-known defectors who constitute the problem.

The CIA replied to the Senate report's criticisms by saying that it had had only six problem cases since 1969, Simmons said.

Two were Romanians who went public last year with charges that the CIA had broken its promises about resettlement in this country in return for secrets about their homeland. The pair, former embassy information officer Nicolae Horodinca and former intelligence officer Nicola Traian, remain unemployed after two years in this country and have threatened to return home.

The four other unhappy defectors acknowledged by the CIA included the longtime housekeeper of a CIA "safe-house," who went back to her native Yugoslavia after a dispute with the agency over her pension, and a Czechoslovak intelligence agent, Frantisek August.

The bigger names often establish themselves financially by writing books about their experiences. Other defectors' books, containing more sensitive material, have been limited to circulation within the U.S. intelligence community — with royalties paid by the CIA.

The less-known defectors have a harder time of it. Although the CIA may take months to debrief them, their chief value is in confirming information obtained elsewhere, experts say. Socially, they have serious problems with adjustment to a lowered status in an alien environment and the necessity of finding their own way after long depending on a government-directed career path.

Even if they are willing to work and be trained in a new profession, with the CIA picking up the tab, they may find it difficult to operate under the strict guidelines: a new identity and obscure location for safety reasons, an invented past and obvious limitations on references and friends. It splits many marriages.

The committee staff recommended that the CIA provide psychiatric counseling to help defectors cope with the extraordinary strains of adjustment. Spies who come in from the cold may find it rather chilly inside as well.